

Good Children - Whose Children are They?

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Whom do we refer to when we speak of good children? We believe good children are those who have learnt to love their parents. That has to be the very genesis of goodness in children. We are expected to love everybody in the world in which we live. This is a mutual obligation we as humans, owe to one another, irrespective of colour or creed. In Buddhism, we call this spirit of friendliness *mettā* or *maitrī*. We can translate this into English very precisely as '**the spirit of universal friendliness** towards everything that lives' [*sabba-pāṇa-bhūta-hitānukampā*].

But in terms of Buddhist thinking, there is no doubt that all of us, as children [of somebody at some time], are primarily linked with our parents. It is they who begot us into this world. We are not dispatched here into this world from an unknown source of origin, created and destined to be born. As we get down to the basics of life, utilizing the knowledge provided by the developing medical sciences of the world today, we know that our origin primarily goes back to the combination of a sperm and an ovum provided by a father and a mother [*mātāpettika-sambhava* as the Buddhist texts refer to it.]. This is also totally compatible with the modern concept of i.v.f. and test-tube babies.

For this same reason, the parents are collectively called *āpādakā* [producers or generators of offspring]. The mother, because of her special progenitive aspect of carrying the child in her womb, is called *jananī* or progenitor in a very specialized sense.] It is the parents who provide sustenance for growth [*posetā*], specially the mother with her own breast milk [*thaññaṃ pāyeti*].

This awareness of the intimate relationship of children to their parents, which they presumably acquire from the moment of their birth, starting with the

increased warmth of a mother's body in relation to her new-born babe, has to be nurtured in children during the period of meaningful 'child rearing', extending well beyond the initial stage of child bearing and delivery of the child by the mother in the labor room.

Buddhist teachings persistently maintain that in order to effortlessly achieve this growth of love and respect in children towards their parents [*na mātā putta-kāraṇā labhetha mānaṃ pūjaṃ vā na pitā putta-kāraṇā*. A. II.32. Also AA. III.64], there should be with the parents, both mother and father, a regular and incessant process of child care. But in Buddhism this is more than a single word concept. It is both a comprehensive and coordinated process of activity through all avenues of thought, word and deed. These are carefully preached and recorded in Buddhist texts under the heading *Satara Sangraha Vastu* in Sinhala [*cattāri saṅgaha vatthūni* in Pali]. We would make bold to say that one would search in vain elsewhere for better guidance on child care.

In a field of study which we have chosen to call 'Buddhism for the Younger' we wish to discuss in detail these four segments of child care with a view to making the children know the very loving relationship in which they, as they grow up, stand towards their parents. We are keen to avoid such rugged and mutilating concepts like rights, demands and challenges, emerging from either groups of parents or children. A sensitive and realistic awareness on the part of both parents and children, with regard to the situations of child bearing and child rearing, and an understanding of the accompanying growth of affection in the process, we believe, would invariably lead to an increase of the affection and respect of the children towards their parents and equally well to a reduction of the tension and friction that tend to grow between parents and their offspring.

These begin with the parental provision of child-needs like food, clothing and shelter all of which are brought under the category of *dāna*, i.e. gifting and making provision for these. It would undeniably be both painful and embittering

for young children to fall into those same dreaded categories of haves and have-nots as adults do, both within a family and in comparison with the rest of the society at large. These are very realistically envisaged and anticipated under this segment of *dāna* which cautions parents about child-needs.

These are not to be easily brushed aside on grounds of poverty or economic atrocities of society, even though realities they be. A great deal more of planning and preparation, both by the state and the families themselves, is needed to steer clear of such harsh and disastrous situations. Everybody in society, including the children, have to rise up to understand these. That is why we bring them up here, so that many a crisis of child suicide, alienation etc. may be averted.

From this very broad area of physical needs to which both adults and children are equally sensitive, we move on to the next one of emotional requirements. Parents are forewarned about the need of kind words or *priya vacana* from parents to their children [referred to in Pali as *peyya-vajja*]. This comes very near to saying 'children shall not live by bread alone'. And to continue the saying 'but with loving words from their parents.' None of these, neither the provision of material needs nor the offer of emotional requirements, can be substituted with any other. They must co-exist.

Third in the list of child rearing activities is counseling or moral guidance [*atthacariyā*]. Parents must necessarily possess the virtue of being considered older and wiser than their children. Parents do need to qualify themselves for this. This entitles them to indicate to their children as to the good and bad in the world, to the correct and the incorrect. These relative assessments, according to Buddhism, are in terms of the impact our words and deeds have on society and the people, including ourselves.

The wholesomeness of what we do and the benefits they bring to man and

bird and beast, are the criteria the Buddhists adopt in voting in favour of our justifiable good action. Inspire and stimulate oneself and others, starting with your children in the home, to do such wholesome deeds [= *kusalassa upasampadā*] and restrain oneself and others from doing what is foul and contaminating [= *sabba-pāpassa akaraṇaṃ*].

The despicable crimes committed in this country day after day and unceasingly and competitively reported in the media via all channels, are clearly very convincing evidence of the lack of this moral guidance from all responsible quarters of the land. In order of priority and significance they are the home, religious institutions, educational centers and the state itself. All these need to be prosecuted and severely punished for this gross neglect of their duty.

Among the most glaring of these today can be listed the ingeniously manipulated elimination by all interested parties, and even by individuals, of human beings who do not toe the line with you in terms of party politics, family alliances, or business interests etc. The necessary machinery for these is well set, almost throughout the country. The scandalous elimination through abortion of unwanted babies, unwanted as we know for shameless reasons, ranks, more or less, second. Who shall educate whom in this country for the elimination of these? These are some among naked realities we face today, without even a trace of moral guilt in anybody's heart. A saner world cannot afford to turn a blind eye to these any more.

The last of the four child care items is *samānattatā* or 'emotional mobility' of parents. This is the ability or competence of parents to move in the company of their children, with ease through the emotional crises which their children have to face constantly as they tread their very- often-slippery path of life. These crisis situations in child life can be in the category of both ups and downs. of joy and grief, of elation and depression, *sukha-dukkhe samānattatā* as our texts very wisely put it. This, we consider, is the most challenging to the parents. Work your

way up to it.

Good children are a product of the fulfillment of the four requirements we have discussed so far. Failure on the part of parents, our texts insist, would alienate the children from the parents. Parents have necessarily to feel deserted on account of the failure of their contract. For the parents, it is a negative punishment. It would be no less than repentance in a 'home for the aged.' The state and the community has to face the added burden of being saddled with juvenile delinquency. They say somewhere that 'All were lost for the want of a horse-shoe nail.' We Buddhists insist that all shall be lost for want of parental love and care in the home.